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ABSTRACT

Many teens experience a time when keeping up with school work is difficult. Some adolescents are able to get through this time with minimal assistance from their parents or teachers. However, when the difficulties last longer than a single grading period or are linked to a long-term pattern of poor school performance, parents and teachers may need to intervene. To do so effectively, parents and teachers need to be aware of some common indicators of an adolescent at risk for school failure, including attention problems as a young child, multiple retentions in grade, poor grades, absenteeism, lack of connection with the school, behavior problems, lack of confidence, and limited goals for the future. Schools that develop programs that ease transitions for students may be able to reduce student failure rates. Parenting style may also have an impact. When the authoritative style is used--in which parents offer warmth and support in addition to limit-setting and supervision--the adolescent may be more likely to experience academic success. When an adolescent is having difficulty, parents and teachers can assist by making the time to listen to and try to understand the teen's fears or concerns; setting appropriate boundaries for behavior that are consistently enforced; encouraging the teen to participate in school activities; attending school functions; and meeting as a team, including parents, teachers, and school counselor, asking how they can support the teen's learning environment, and sharing their expectations for the child's future. Parents and teachers can also help by arranging tutoring or study group support for the teen; providing a supportive home and school environment; helping the child think about career options; encouraging the teen to volunteer in the community or to participate in community groups to provide an out-of-school support system; and emphasizing the importance of study skills, hard work, and follow-through. Contains 11 references. (LPP)

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If an Adolescent Begins to Fail in School, What Can Parents and Teachers Do?

Anne S. Robertson

"How was school today?" Carol's mother asked tentatively. "Awful!" was the reply as Carol dropped her backpack in the middle of the kitchen floor and started stomping up the stairs to her bedroom. "It was the worst day ever. I don't know why you even bother to ask me!" Carol's mother sighed. She had expected that the teen years would be difficult, but she hoped that Carol would grow out of this difficult time soon.

Is This Simply a "Phase?"

Many teens experience a time when keeping up with school work is difficult. These periods may last several weeks and may include social problems as well as a slide in academic performance. Research suggests that problems are more likely to occur during a transitional year, such as moving from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Pantleo, 1992). Some adolescents are able to get through this time with minimal assistance from their parents or teachers. It may be enough for a parent to be available simply to listen and suggest coping strategies, provide a supportive home environment, and encourage the child's participation in school activities. However, when the difficulties last longer than a single grading period, or are linked to a long-term pattern of poor school performance or problematic behaviors, parents and teachers may need to intervene.

Identifying Adolescents Who Are At-Risk for Failure

Some "at-risk" indicators, such as those listed here, may represent persistent problems from the early elementary school years for some children (Jacobsen & Hofmann, 1997; O'Sullivan, 1989). Other students may overcome early difficulties but begin to experience related problems during middle school or high school. For others, some of these indicators may only become noticeable in early adolescence. To intervene effectively, parents and teachers can be aware of some common indicators of an adolescent at-risk for school failure, including:

- Attention problems as a young child—the student has a school history of attention issues or disruptive behavior.
- Multiple retentions in grade—the student has been retained one or more years.
- Poor grades—the student consistently performs at barely average or below average levels.
- Absenteeism—the student is absent five or more days per term.
- Lack of connection with the school—the student is not involved in sports, music, or other school-related extracurricular activities.
- Behavior problems—the student may be frequently disciplined or show a sudden change in school behavior, such as withdrawing from class discussions.
- Lack of confidence—the student believes that success is linked to native intelligence rather than hard work, and believes that his or her own ability is insufficient, and nothing can be done to change the situation.
- Limited goals for the future—the student seems unaware of career options available or how to attain those goals.

When more than one of these attributes characterizes an adolescent, the student will likely need assistance from both parents and teachers to complete his or her educational experience successfully. Girls, and students from culturally or linguistically diverse groups, may be especially at-risk for academic failure if they exhibit these behaviors (Steinberg, 1996; Debold, 1995). Stepping back and letting these students "figure it out" or "take responsibility for their own learning" may lead to a deeper cycle of failure within the school environment.

Adolescents Want to Feel Connected to Their Family, School, Teachers, and Peers

In a recent survey, when students were asked to evaluate their transitional years, they indicated interest in connecting to their new school and requested more information about extracurricular activities, careers, class schedules, and study skills. Schools that develop programs that ease transitions for students and increase communication between schools may be able to reduce student failure rates (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Pantleo, 1992). Some schools make a special effort to keep in touch with their students. One example is the Young Adult Learning Academy (YALA), a successful alternative school for adolescent dropouts. According to YALA's director, Peter Klienbard, if a student at YALA appears to be having a problem or family emergency, teachers and counselors follow up quickly (Siegel, 1996, p. 50).

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The Role of Parenting Style

Parenting style may have an impact on the child's school behavior. Many experts distinguish among permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991). These parenting styles are associated with different combinations of warmth, support, and limit-setting and supervision for children. The permissive style tends to emphasize warmth and neglect limit-setting and supervision; the authoritarian style tends to emphasize the latter and not the former; while the authoritative style is one in which parents offer warmth and support, and limit-setting and supervision. When the authoritative parenting style is used, the adolescent may be more likely to experience academic success (Glasgow et al., 1997, p. 521). Authoritative parents are warm and responsive but are also able to establish and enforce standards for their children's behavior, monitor conduct, and encourage communication. Authoritative parents make clear that they expect responsible behavior from their children and that they are available to support the child as needed (Glasgow et al., 1997, p. 508).

How Can Parents and Teachers Respond?

Parents often feel uncertain about how best to approach their adolescent or the school when their teen seems to be having difficulty. However, it is important to remember that adolescents need their parents not only to set appropriate expectations and boundaries, but also to advocate for them. Teachers can ease a parent's concerns by including the parent as part of the student's educational support team. When an adolescent is having difficulty, parents and teachers can assist by:

- making the time to listen to and try to understand the teen's fears or concerns;
- setting appropriate boundaries for behavior that are consistently enforced;
- encouraging the teen to participate in one or more school activities;
- attending school functions, sports, and plays;
- meeting as a team, including parents, teachers, and school counselor, asking how they can support the teen's learning environment, and sharing their expectations for the child's future;
- arranging tutoring or study group support for the teen from the school or the community through organizations such as the local YMCA or a local college or university;
- providing a supportive home and school environment that clearly values education;
- helping the child think about career options by arranging for visits to local companies and colleges, picking up information on careers and courses, and encouraging an internship or career-oriented part-time job;
- encouraging the teen to volunteer in the community or to participate in community groups such as the YMCA, Scouting, 4-H, religious organizations, or other service-oriented groups to provide an out-of-school support system;
- emphasizing at home and in school the importance of study skills, hard work, and follow-through.

Conclusion

Understanding the factors that may put an adolescent at-risk for academic failure will help parents determine if their teen is in need of extra support. Above all, parents need to persevere. The teen years do pass, and most adolescents survive them, in spite of bumps along the way. Being aware of common problems can help parents know when it is important to reach out and ask for help before a "difficult time" develops into a more serious situation.

For More Information

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